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ABSTRACT

Investigations conducted by Spokane Falls Community College (SFCC) indicate that introductory computer courses for business students should emphasize the elimination of "computer phobia" through the provision of hands-on experience. In a survey of over 160 area businesses, SFCC found that 53% of the respondents ranked hands-on experience as the most desirable form of instruction; while 37% indicated that a combination of theory and experience was the most desirable form. In response to this employer need and in an effort to increase efficiency in terms of costs and student time, SFCC initiated a competency-based, one-credit Introduction to Microcomputers course. In this course, students utilize the TRS-80 Radio Shack computer in the college's Business/Math Machines Center and complete exercises in flow charting, simple programming, data entry, data correction, and data retrieval. The course is offered on a continuous enrollment basis, and students complete assignments at their own pace, usually within 15 hours. After one year of implementation, the course has proven to be both an effective hands-on complement to computer theory courses and a useful core class for business students who do not need substantial theoretical instruction to effectively use the computer as a tool. This descriptive report concludes with short answers to seven questions about course management and equipment. (JP)

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DESK TOP COMPUTERS

What type of computer course should all business students have? How do you eliminate computer phobia?

Recently, Spokane Falls Community College selected 160 local businesses at random and asked, "What type of computer training do you find most valuable: Classroom Theory Only, Hands-On Experience Only, Both, or Neither?" Hands-On Experience Only was ranked highest -- by 53% of the firms; 37% said Both; 8% said Classroom Theory; and only 2% said neither.

In addition, our vocational advisory groups tell us their major concerns about computer training are not specific computer job skills or extensive computer theory. They want people with an awareness of computers and a willingness to learn about them. They want people with flexibility and without computer phobia. In short, they want employees who will be able to use a computer.

In addition to meeting these employer needs, we had to have a course that was very efficient in terms of student time and school costs. The course had to be educationally effective as well as cost effective. Students needed to enjoy the learning experience and complete it feeling comfortable using a computer as a tool.

Spokane Falls Community College has a computer course that meets these needs. During Spring quarter 1979, we started experimenting with a new one-credit introduction to microcomputers class. The new course which evolved, Desk Top Computers, introduces using the TRS-80 Radio Shack computer with exercises in flowcharting, simple programming, data entry, data correction, and data retrieval.

Material for this course has been written, used, and rewritten. Using student and faculty comments, suggestions, and criticisms, we have updated and revised until we now have materials that can be used by self-directed adults, ages 16 through 60, as a successful, practical, and enjoyable experience.

The course is designed for open or continuous enrollment. It is competency-based, not time-based. Students work at their own pace and may finish the course whenever the course objectives have been completed -- usually in about 15 hours. Some students spread their computer time out over weeks but many get "hooked" on working with computers and finish the entire course quickly -- sometimes in two or three days. They are welcome to use the computers on a drop-in basis, or they may reserve a machine for up to twenty hours per quarter. Desk top computers is not costly because it does not require extensive equipment or facilities. With only four TRS-80 Radio Shack computers, we served about 100 students per quarter in our day and

evening programs in 1979-80 year with very few bottlenecks.

The computers are part of our Business Math/Machines Center which is open from 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday, from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Friday, and from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon on Saturday. The Center is staffed with regular college faculty, instructor technicians, and student tutors. There are always at least two staff members in the Center to work with the students on a one-to-one basis. Our emphasis is on using staff as learning facilitators -- developing a personal relationship among the students, the staff members, and the computers.

Desk Top Computers is a course that fits well in our Business Math/Machines Center. The Computer Science Department recommends students take the course as a hands-on complement to their theory courses. It is now a core class in several business one-year and two-year programs. The course eliminates computer phobia. It meets students' needs as defined by a business survey, vocational advisory groups, students, and instructors.

To summarize, you do not need to be a watchmaker to tell time, and you do not need to be a data processor to use effectively a computer as a tool. Desk Top Computers is a springboard for on-the-job applications and other educational applications such as programming, information processing, library science, accounting, economics, psychology, chemistry, engineering, industrial arts, etc.

Q: Does it replace a computer theory or programming language class?

A: No, it supplements and introduces both theory classes and computer language classes.

Q: What equipment is necessary?

A: A microcomputer.

Q: What department should handle the course?

A: Business, Math, Computer Science, Data Processing, Learning Resource Center, etc.

Q: Do instructors and other staff members need special training?

A: No special training, other than learning to use the TRS-80 Model 1 computer, is necessary. Many instructors with little computer background enjoy teaching the course.

Q: Can the course be taught in a lab situation or in a conventional class?

A: Either situation works well. The lab produces maximum flexibility.

Q: Are there any prerequisites?

A: No.

Q: Can this course be used with any brand of computer?

A: Yes, with revisions. We use a TRS-80 but we will soon have materials for the Apple II.

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